

By Bob Keefe

Wednesday, January 5, 2011

WASHINGTON -- As Republicans officially took control of the U.S. House on Wednesday, three Georgia Democrats provided the biggest surprises of the day.

As a clerk called the roll for each House member to announce his or her vote for the speaker of the House for the 112th Congress, most Republicans stood and ceremoniously voted for Rep. John Boehner and most Democrats stood to vote for Rep. Nancy Pelosi, as expected.

Then came the turn of Democratic Rep. John Barrow of Savannah. When his name was called, Barrow proclaimed he would vote for Rep. John Lewis of Atlanta, setting off a low murmur across the House floor.

A few minutes later, the clerk called the name of Democratic Rep. Sanford Bishop of Albany. Bishop answered simply "present" -- the only representative to do so.

One other representative, Democrat Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona, cast a surprising second vote for Lewis -- officially making him the very distant fourth-place vote-getter in the election for House speaker.

Boehner got 241 votes, Pelosi got 173 and Democratic Rep. Heath Shuler of North Carolina, who had publicly challenged Pelosi, got 11 votes. Five other representatives got one vote each.

That Barrow and Bishop didn't support Pelosi in the largely symbolic vote wasn't a huge shock. Both of the relatively conservative Democrats shunned any connection to Pelosi, a liberal Democrat from San Francisco, during their recent hotly contested congressional races back in Georgia.

With a large contingent of Republicans in both of their districts, and the Republican-led state Legislature about to begin the redistricting process, both Barrow and Bishop realize that conservative voters could hold against them any support they gave to Pelosi, who became a symbol of Republican angst during the last elections. By nominating Lewis, Barrow also can avoid criticism from liberal Democrats.

Lewis said later that Barrow had called him late Tuesday and told him about his plans.

"I said, 'I cannot tell you not to, but I will not encourage you to do it because it will be embarrassing because I'm not running for anything,' " Lewis said.

Giffords' vote, Lewis said, came as a complete surprise.

"She had never said a word to me about it," he said.

In a statement, Barrow suggested his vote for Lewis was about more than just politics.

"There is no person who can bring people together better than John Lewis," Barrow said. "That's what he's been doing his whole life."

A spokesman for Giffords, meanwhile, said she voted for Lewis because of his "courageousness."

"The congresswoman's vote for Rep. John Lewis signaled her desire for courageous leadership and high moral standards at a critical time in our nation's history," Giffords spokesman C.J. Karamargin said. "He is one of our nation's most prominent civil rights leaders and a hero to all Americans."

Bishop said after the vote: "I had heard from my constituents -- both supporters and opponents -- in this last election that Nancy Pelosi was not the face of our party. I'm listening to the voice of my constituents."